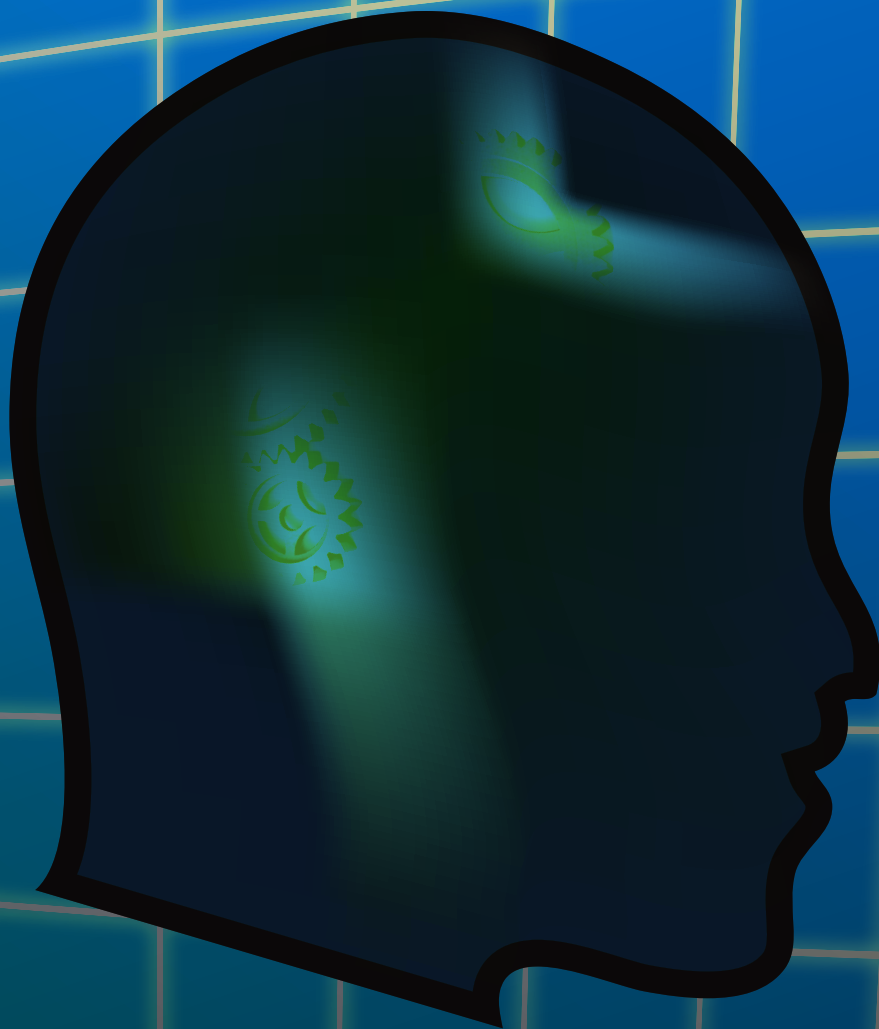


Leaders on Thinking:



**How Successful People Think and
10 Ways to Change Your Thinking**

Leaders on Thinking

Dear Iowans,

What if we could crawl into the minds of highly successful people and observe how they think and lead?

Thinking plays a powerful role in our lives. It is the difference between good and bad decisions, ideas, and solutions. Two Iowa school administrators, Lowell Ernst, director of curriculum and instruction for the Pella Community School District, and Dave Versteeg, superintendent of the Montezuma Community School District, set out to study the thinking of leaders in various fields, including education, manufacturing, and health care.



This report, Leaders on Thinking, is the culmination of their work. It summarizes the common themes Ernst and Versteeg noted in successful people, as well as steps that lead to better thinking. For Ernst and Versteeg, the goal was to improve their own thinking and leadership. At the Iowa Department of Education, our goal is to share this innovative report with Iowans and the rest of the world. In Iowa, my hope is to grow exceptional thinking in our schools and homes as we steer our state onto the path of having one of the best education systems in the world.

With respect and admiration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason E. Glass". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial 'J'.

Jason E. Glass, Ed.D.
State Director and Chief Learner
Iowa Department of Education

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In every realm
of your life,
good thinking
pays off.

There is nothing more practical than good thinking. No matter what your circumstance or goals, no matter where you are, or what problems you face, you are better off if your thinking leads you to better decisions, solutions, ideas, and innovations. In every realm of your life – employee, employer, friend, spouse, parent, or citizen – good thinking pays off. Poor thinking inevitably causes problems, such as wasted time, energy, and resources. Most people never realize the powerful role thinking plays in their lives, and few gain significant understanding and control of their thinking.

What is good thinking, and what causes it to happen? What does good thinking look like in practice? Wikipedia defines thinking as “using rational judgment” and “the process of using one’s mind to consider or reason about something.” Synonyms for thinking include thoughtful, rational reflection and meditation. There are different types of specific thinking – critical thinking, creative thinking, strategic thinking, lateral thinking, and associational thinking, to name a few. All seem highly applicable to leaders, both personally and professionally.

We are Lowell Ernst, director of curriculum and instruction for the Pella Community School District, and Dave Versteeg, superintendent of the Montezuma Community School District. We began interviewing exceptional thinkers several years ago, when we both worked for the Pella Community School District. Our work has included interviews with dozens of individuals in the pursuit of bettering our own thinking and improving our leadership skills. These interviews targeted leaders of innovation and excellence, no matter their field, including leaders in education, manufacturing, business, health care, and finance.

Our research started with the book, *Thinking for a Change: 11 Ways Highly Successful People Approach Life and Work* by John Maxwell as part of our school district’s administrative team discussions. Maxwell summarized one of his findings by concluding, “If you want to think like a millionaire, hang out with billionaires.” Maxwell’s notion that some of what billionaire thinkers do could rub off and improve our thinking gave us hope. We thought it would be an excellent professional development activity for the two of us to talk with millionaire or even billionaire thinkers and learn from them. We made a list of people we thought were great thinkers (at least better thinkers than we are) and brainstormed questions we would want to ask them. Some questions were specifically about thinking. For example: “Do you have a specific

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routine or place for thinking?” Other questions related to decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership issues in general. We then lined up our first interviews. These first interviews were generally with our own acquaintances, which made them easy to set up. We concluded in part by asking those people for names of good thinkers, thereby increasing our list of potential interviews.

This article summarizes the general findings of our interviews to date and the ways in which anyone can become a better thinker. It shows the commonalities in thinking we observed from successful people in a variety of industries and professions. Our methodology is not pure research. We asked each person the same questions, but each interview was different and often took its own path as the conversation deepened. Most interviews were done in person and a couple over the phone. These findings are based on general themes we heard from the interviews as a whole. No one person epitomizes all of the findings, nor is this an exclusive list of findings by any means. We hope that this piece of writing leads others to do more reading, inquiry, and thinking about thinking.

General Findings:

1. **Reflection is critical** – The best thinkers deliberately reflect on their decisions and rationale based on some sort of pre-determined standard or guide. The best thinkers have a process. For most, it is an informal process, but others have a formal routine for reflecting that includes a specific time, location, and set of questions. Several people journal new ideas and subjects to ponder further. The best reflections usually are based on stated goals and specific outcomes that could be used to measure and judge the effectiveness of the decisions, solutions, and strategies related to the goals or outcomes. These thinkers reflect and learn from the past but put considerably more efforts into the present and, especially, the future. The reflection process makes the leaders aware of their patterns of thought. They become more alert to what drew them away from critical information, which helps them maintain their focus.
2. **Have a goal-oriented, outcome-based style** – Having goals and grounding thinking in results gives much more accurate feedback as to the effectiveness of a person’s thinking. The best thinkers are more focused on long-term goals than short-term ones. This is not to say they don’t have short-term goals; the short-term goals are not a means

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to an end, but rather a check mark on progress to the long-term goals. The best thinkers adjust their course based upon the analysis of short-term results that align with reaching the long-term goals. Reaching long-term goals is a matter of constant refinement of decisions and strategies. The best thinkers are flexible on the plan, but are laser-focused on the desired outcomes.

3. **Constant learning** – Thinkers are continuous learners. Not all people who love to learn are leaders, but all leaders love to learn. They constantly are searching for more knowledge and information to improve themselves and the purpose of their organization. They use this knowledge to leverage their thinking to a higher level of leadership and action. They often look for lessons in areas and with people outside their expertise or professional field to expand their thinking from a creative or “out-of-the-box” point of view. Reading and personal network conversations are the two most frequent sources of knowledge. Effective thinkers are eager to try out what they’ve learned to see how it will work in their organizations. This application of new learning helps them continue to grow as leaders.
4. **Collaboration works best** – Consistently, these thinkers emphasize that their best decisions and thinking have involved others, and the worst decisions and thinking they have experienced was done in isolation. Collaboration doesn’t happen unless others are needed to solve a problem or complete a task. One must seek others out and “co-labor” with them. Most of the best thinkers seek out people who have different sets of skills, different perspectives, and don’t necessarily agree with their points of view. This increases understanding of the situation and expands the thinking necessary to find the best solution. Brainstorming is an important aspect of collaborating with others. This collaborative nature requires a degree of intellectual humility that allows for reflective thinking about the ideas of others.
5. **It’s OK to change one’s mind** – The thinkers are aware of many situations in which they changed their minds about something based on new knowledge, understanding, or point of view. It also is evident that this is not done in hindsight or after the fact. The best thinkers seem to be able to keep their greater thinking focused on the ultimate goal and to make the necessary changes in day-to-day thinking that leads to accomplishing a goal. But when data, feedback, and new

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knowledge are evident, it is OK – in fact, it's actually necessary – to change one's mind about a goal or desired outcome.

6. **Experience matters** – All thinkers appreciate the fact that they have gotten better at thinking as they grow older and gain more experience at work and in life. This has a great deal to do with their ability to reflect and fail forward, or to make the most of their mistakes. There is more to experience than gaining; it takes disciplined, focused goals. Most thinkers talk about how they learned from their mistakes and made better decisions in similar situations later on. As one interviewee put it, “I have made some good decisions recently, partially because I made plenty of bad ones along the way.” But richer thinking is gained from experience when it can be applied to new and different situations. Because of this experiential knowledge, these thinkers are especially adept at anticipation and predicting possible outcomes and results in new and unique situations.
7. **Power of “and”** – The best thinkers do not see decisions as simply a choice between A or B. In problem-solving, they are often determined to get both options – A *and* B. This type of thinking comes from the growth-minded mental approach that views challenges as opportunities. Doing both A and B isn't simply a compromise so that both options are watered-down. It is about being creative, positive, and focused to accomplish both with the same integrity as accomplishing each individually. The “and-not-or” approach also is evident in the hiring process. The best thinkers are not satisfied in selecting a candidate who has some of the skills, attributes, and knowledge they need; they want candidates who have or can acquire all the skills, attributes, and knowledge necessary for the position. This type of thinking requires seeing others and their viewpoints as resources rather than obstacles. It involves a desire to come up with the best solution, rather than one's own solution.
8. **Bad decisions come from bad thinking** – All thinkers can recall a time when they have made a bad decision and can identify the elements of their thinking that led to the bad decision. This can happen as an individual and in a group. The best thinkers learn from poor thinking and control the conditions that led to it. Common issues reported in poor thinking included making decisions in isolation or a lack of collaboration, a focus on the wrong goal or outcome, a short-sighted view of the

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unintended consequences of a decision (especially toward people in the organization), and a lack of situational understanding to which a decision needs to be made, i.e., lack of data or the political landscape.

9. **Productive thinking is about action** – There is no good thinking without action. Consistently, we heard how these exceptional thinkers put ideas, strategies, and innovations into practice. Thinking which does not lead to action is not thinking at all – it's just wasted time and energy. The action should be focused and connected to a specific outcome and plan. Think of it as a mathematical formula: a disciplined person x disciplined thinking = disciplined action. The key to the formula is multiplication, not addition. If any of the components of the formula are zero, then the action is zero. Even to improve a component by one digit exponentially improves the action. It's very clear to the best thinkers that the action of the organization will be carried out by many people, and, therefore, as a leader, it is part of their responsibility to think through how a decision will impact others within the organization as it unfolds. This includes those who are involved in the implementation and how the feedback loop is developed to determine the effectiveness of the actions.
10. **Think differently to think better** - These people strive to better themselves, and their organizations, to be better than the competition and to reach a higher purpose for their cause. As leaders, they want to think differently from their counterparts to improve their organizations. An extremely effective way that these thinkers do this is by connecting the unconnected. Those leaders who can see how their actions impact other parts of the organization increase their value to everyone. This is often seen by the innovation found in their organizations' initiatives, new ideas, and solutions to problems. It can be an innovation of method, process, and product. These people have a higher level of cause-and-effect thinking. An analogy would be that average thinking is like playing checkers, but exceptional thinking is like playing chess.

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Develop your
listening skills.

Ways to Change Your Thinking:

Thinking differently is easier said than done. While no one is born a good thinker, moving from the low end of the thinking continuum to the high end is not accomplished by following a recipe or by reading a couple of books. When good thinking is applied consistently, it can change below-average and average ideas, solutions, and plans into better ones – and possibly great ones. This will make a tremendous difference to an organization. The exceptional thinkers we interviewed chose to put in the time and effort required to think differently and better. Will you?

Here are 10 ways to start the process:

- **Develop knowledge and awareness to the source of your own ignorance and biases.** Take these into account when problem-solving and strategizing. Try to minimize them and control them because you will not be able to eliminate them. Your point of view is not a bad thing. It is the lack of knowledge and understanding of why you hold it that can be dangerous.
- **Develop your listening skills.** Observe how others demonstrate excellent and poor thinking. Learn from and document examples on both ends of the thinking continuum.
- **Think specifically.** Think about specific actions that need to be taken to reach a goal or outcome. Anticipate reactions and outcomes of various strategies before implementing any of them.
- **Think optimistically and then realistically.** Engage in positive thinking about how things will play out, and focus on what can go right to accomplish the task, goal, or solution. Don't assume things will come easily and effortlessly, however, because unrealistic thinking causes ill preparation.
- **Determine how to improve thinking.** Focus on "getting better," rather than a fixed conclusion of "being good" at thinking. Having a growth mindset allows for adapting, being flexible, and engaging in continuous improvement.

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Seek out good thinkers if they don't exist in your network.

- **Question, question, question.** Develop many questions to use for analysis, reflection, and inquiry. Listen to others ask questions and try out the best ones. Use the appropriate questions for the situation and the desired outcome.
- **Understand the emotions of thinking.** Begin to understand and manage the emotions of thinking because emotions can cloud judgment and unduly influence thinking. The logical and emotional parts of the brain do not function well simultaneously. The part that operates must be a decision, rather than a reaction.
- **Collaborate with others.** Collaborate with a single colleague or a group of colleagues, depending on the situation and thinking necessary. Be careful, however; poor group thinking leads to the same poor results as poor individual thinking. When possible, surround yourself with other billionaire thinkers.
- **Talk with people who are good at thinking; learn from them.** Make a deliberate effort to seek them if they don't exist in your current network of colleagues.
- **Reflect.** Find a time, a routine, and a place to think about thinking. Thinking is like working out muscles: The more you do it, the better you get. Thinking can be exhausting. Stick with it, and improve.

RECOMMENDED READING LIST:

- *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell
- *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell
- *Thinking for a Change: 11 Ways Highly Successful People Approach Life and Work*, John C. Maxwell
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck
- *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking is Not the Answer*, Jim Collins
- *NutureShock: New Thinking About Children*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman
- *That Used To Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World It Invented and How We Can Come Back*, Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum
- *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman
- *Leadership and Self-Deception: Getting out of the Box*, Arbinger Institute
- *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky
- *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel H. Pink
- *25 Days to Better Thinking and Better Living: A Guide for Improving Every Aspect of Your Life*, Linda Elder and Richard Paul
- *The Innovator's DNA: Mastering the Five Skills of Disruptive Innovators*, Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen, Clayton M. Christensen

We would enjoy hearing your ideas and strategies for better thinking, as well as suggested billionaire and millionaire thinkers to interview.

Join us at
www.leadersonthinking.blogspot.com
and on **Twitter** using the hashtag:
#leadersonthinking.

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